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SUBJECT: KINSHASA SITREP 5: FIGHTING DIMINISHES INTO THE EVENING

REF: KINSHASA 355 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) The sounds of gunfire around the Embassy compound in the Gombe district of Kinshasa diminished into the evening of March 23, as fighting has appeared to wind down between elements of the Congolese military loyal to the government and guard forces of Jean-Pierre Bemba. Occasional bursts of automatic and small arms fire were heard in the distance as the main area of fighting is reportedly concentrated two miles southeast of Gombe in the vicinity of Ndolo airfield, adjacent to the DRC Air Force's Kinshasa base.

12. (U) There are no reports of AmCit casualties from the fighting. Nearly 120 Embassy personnel, including local staff, will remain at the Chancery, JAO complex and USAID offices for a second evening. Remaining AmCits stuck in office buildings in the Gombe area are reportedly safe. Post advised AmCits via the warden system earlier today to standfast in their current positions. The EAC will convene again at 6:30 a.m. March 24.

13. (U) RSO and DATT drove through the Gombe area west to the American School around 5:00 p.m. to survey the security situation. They reported the roads were nearly empty of civilian traffic but saw several FARDC armored personnel carriers in the streets. The Congolese military and Republican Guard forces appeared to be in control of the main Boulevard de 30 Juin and had established several positions throughout Gombe. Many stores along the boulevard were looted and both saw at least three bodies lying in the road.

14. (U) The GDRC has not released casualty figure and MONUC military officials said they do not yet have a reliable casualty count. Media reports quoting local hospital and mortuary officials suggest nearly 60 people have been killed since fighting began March 22, including 12 members of the FARDC's 7th Integrated Brigade, 37 troops from the Republican Guard, and 12 civilians. A number of Bemba's guard forces have also undoubtedly been killed or wounded, but no estimates are available.

15. (U) Bemba said in an interview with Dutch public radio station VRT that he was a "victim" of a government attack. He charged that Kabila wants to "physically eliminate" him and "muzzle" the political opposition. While calling on the population to remain calm, Bemba charged the Kabila government preferred to use force rather than negotiate.

16. (SBU) Information Minister Toussaint Tshilombo told us the evening of March 23 security forces may search certain residences in the Gombe district March 24 that are suspected of harboring weapons and troops. He indicated these searches

would not be conducted at residences of "peaceful" foreign nationals. Presidential diplomatic adviser Andre Kapanga told us searches would be restricted to the area around Bemba's riverside residence and former official compound along 30 Juin.

17. (SBU) Bemba remains this evening at the residence of the South African Ambassador. South African embassy officials confirmed South African media reports that Local and Provincial Government Minister Sydney Mufamadi plans to arrive in Kinshasa from Pretoria March 24 to help negotiate a ceasefire between Bemba and President Kabila. When asked about Bemba's status or possible asylum, one South African official said, "It's up to him."
MEECE